

## [Pulling Teeth and Hurricanes]

[W. Mass.?] 1938-9 12/22/38

STATE Massachusetts

NAME OF WORKER Robert Wilder

ADDRESS Northfield, Massachusetts

SUBJECT Living Lore

NAME & ADDRESS OF INFORMANT George O. Dunnell,

Northfield, Massachusetts

DATE OF INTERVIEW December 15, 1938

PLACE OF INTERVIEW The office of George Dunnell's Hay, Grain and Coal Company, Northfield, Massachusetts.

Mr. Dunnell's office is a small wooden shack close to the station of the Central Vermont Railroad in Northfield. His big warehouse filled with its stock of hay, grain and feed is nearby. The day we called was gloomy with more than a hint of snow in the air, and the comfortable warmth of the shack was welcome after a long hike through the snappy cold.

Mr. Dunnell was sitting in his shack near the Central Vermont Railroad Station waiting for customers when we dropped in for a chat. Usually ready and willing to gossip Mr. Dunnell was quiet and rather glum. His face was red and swollen and he was evidently not enjoying his reliable old pipe.

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"Don't mean to be unfriendly"s was his apology, "but I been havin' the damndest toothache. The last two nights — can't get to sleep. You wouldn't think I had enough of my own teeth left to do any achin', but they been kicking up an awful row. My mouth's so sore, I can't seem to keep my pipe set. Makes me feel like hell."

We offered the usual suggestion in such cases. "Better go see a dentist. He'll fix you up".

"That's what the folks been sayin' up to the house. Damned if I want to go to a dentist. I been to one or two that don't hurt much, but the others I been to made up for it. First time I ever went to a dentist was up in Heath when I was young fellow. I had a terrible toothache. It was the jumping toothache, and hurt me clear to the top of my head. There was an old fellow up in Heath that was a combination of tailor, harness maker and dentist. He made me a pair of pants once and they were a damned good fit. He lived on the Adamsville road. Nothing but a cellar hole there now, all the fields grown up to woods. But in those days there was a large square, white house there. And I walked the two miles down there to have him pull out my tooth.

2

"The old fellow made me sit on the floor and stick my legs under his chair. He held my head between his knees. He says to me that seeing as he had only one set of dentist tools, it had to be done that way. In case it was a tooth in the other jaw, he'd a let me have the chair and he would a sat on the floor himself.

"This was all right with me, I only wanted the tooth out. But when he stuck the forceps into my mouth I noticed he had the palsy. His hand shook so that he rapped every tooth in my head. But he had a darned good grip on my jaws, what with my head between his knees, and all I could do was hope that when he finally clamped on, it would be the right tooth and not a good one or my tongue or something.

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"Well sir, he finally clamped on and out came the tooth, neat as you please. And damned if it wasn't the right tooth, too, although when I got out of sight of his house I sat down and took account of stock for it seemed as if I had a worse toothache than when I came down. But the acher had gone all right and I guess it was something about the way he shook those forceps around in my mouth that made my teeth feel as though they were still aching.

"Thomas, his name was, Doc Thomas they called him. He's been dead a good fifty years. But I guess he was what you would call a character.

"There used to be considerable teaming by his place. The hills up that way gave him plenty to do in the harness mending department of his business. I don't know how it happened, but one winter he froze his toes. Pained him a lot afterwards. One day he called out 3 to a teamster that was going by and maybe owed him something for harness repairing. 'stop in when you come back, Joe, I want you to cut a toe off for me.'

"Joe thought he was fooling but he stopped in when he came back as the Doc told him to. And that old fellow had everything all ready. He had taken a block of wood and driven nails into it at the right distance to hold his toes apart. He'd taken a big chisel and honed a razor edge on it. And he had a big wooden mallet lying there handy. He took off his shoe and sock and spread his toes out between the nails, held the chisel just where he wanted, and told Joe to take the mallet and hit it. Joe didn't see what else to do, he was so astonished, so he took the mallet and hit the chisel a hell of a crack. Off dropped Mr. Toe. Then Doc tied up his foot himself. It healed up, and he was all right afterwards. Now, if he had been living today and have done that, he'd a had seventeen different kinds of infections and been in the hospital paying doctor's bills for weeks. But in them days that's all they was to it.

"The old Doc used to like to 'tend funerals. I can remember him up at the old cemetery in Heath, dressed up in a black coat that was pale green from wearin'. He used to figger he

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was town cemetery tender, I guess. Could weep at the drop of a hat, and then when the funeral procession would be a-coming back from the cemetery he'd drop off and have a swig of hot stuff and be as jolly as you please. Say that reminds me have you ever been up at the cemetery in Heath? Well, tie your hat on and button your clothes. It's way up on top of a hill — guess you can see almost all over the world from there. Good place for a cemetery, nearer to heaven than hell anyway. I don't know though, guess it's as near heaven as some of the people buried in it will ever get. The wind blows there like the devil —

“Must have been some place to get caught in the hurricane”, I interrupted, hoping to get Mr. Dunnell started on what I had heard was a good yarn.

“By Christ! Wasn't that hurricane a lulu? I was settin here readin when I noticed it was gettin so damn dark. I couldn't see. I looked at my watch and there it was after four, so I says ‘Guess there's nobody damn fool enough to come trading with me any more tonight, so I might as well shut up and go home’. I had an umbrella, but I knew it wa'n't no use to take that. If the darned thing didn't turn wrong side out the first gust, [l'da?] gone sailing up in the air like a parachute feller. ‘Course I wouldn't a minded that none if the wind had been in the right direction. But it would a-taken me out over the medder, and I was afraid the handle might come off and drop me down near those flooded tobacco barns. So I remembered that I had an oilskin coat around somewhere that I used when I used to peddle coal. Took me sometime to find it. Seems the boys had took it and folded it up to use for a seat when they were playing cards in the shanty here, as they sometimes do, and they had it inside an auto seat cover. Anyway I found it and it was about as hard and as solid as a piece of wood. Stuck together for keeps. It must have taken me half an hour to get the thing straightened out so I could get in it. Even then it felt as though it was made of tin or something. Guess I was damned funny looking, like I had something wrong with my spine, and my arms weren't put on just right. The coat used to come pretty well down towards my shoes, but I couldn't get it any farther than my knees. And it kind a-bulged here and there where it wa'n't supposed to — not round bulges — square ones. But 'twas

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getting dark, so I went as I was. I forgot all about the coat when I got out in that wind. I pulled down my hat and hugged the coat around me. Good thing I didn't meet any ladies, for I found out when I got home that I couldn't a-lifted my arms to tip my hat. The sleeves of that dumb coat stuck fast to the belly of it, and the whole family had to work to get me out of it.

“After I got home and out of the coat and could see what was going on, I looked out the winder and saw our big tree going over as easy as you please — not all at once, but little by little. I watched it down and said that I bet the one in front wouldn't go for that was stronger. Then I saw one of our garage doors spinning by the winder and right across the street on to Doctor Brown's lawn. Somehow it got going on its edge like one of them straw hats we used to wear, and it was certainly making time. I thought I better see what else was about 6 to leave us out back. I went outs and there was my son Leon — big strapping feller, you knows trying to shut the big garage door. He couldn't get anywhere with it. I got a block and a crow bar, and neither of us could move it. And the wind was whooping it up inside something terrible. I was afraid it would blow off a door, or the plaster, or something and get into the house. If it had, it would-a taken out all our winders, I expect. Leon hollered at me that our big oil truck was in the yard, and if I could hold where I was with the bar he would get it. He backed it against the door and it shut then all right. I got back into the house just in time to see the tree I thought was going to stand, go right over.

“Just then, I see a car coming up the street. They was a tree down by Morgan's, or Mattoon's, or somewhere down that way so they couldn't get by, so they went right over the common on to the sidewalk. They come on the sidewalk as far as Doctor Brown's where there was a tree down across the sidewalk. Then they tried to get across the common out into the road again. But the common was soft, because it had been raining so much the past week or so, and they sunk down into it clear to the hubs. 'twa'n't so bad on my front piazza, it being in the lee of the house, and my trees had gone down anyway so I went out there. The big elms was thrashing about something lively, with a big branch, or a load of cord wood dropping off every now and then. The trees near that car looked as if

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they were coming down too. And when I saw that car driver try to back and then forward again, but only getting deeper in the mud, I let out a yell, 'Get out of that you damned fool! Come over 7 here before you get squashed!' The feller climbed out with a grin, and I see that it was the high school principal, Mr. Cobb. He had Mrs. Cobb with him, and they both ran over. Just as they got clear, down came the trees. And they fenced that car in nice as you please. But not a limb touched it — just came down all 'round.

"I had to laugh. You know, Mrs. Brown who lives across the street? Well, she's one of the damndest nervous women you ever saw. I guess she ain't quite responsible anyway, so I shouldn't pay no attention to what she says. But the next day after we got the Cobb's car chopped out and it had been taken away, Mrs. Brown was out taking on. She called to me to come over so over I went thinking she'd found something important. 'Look, Mr. Dunnell', she says. I looked but I didn't see nothing but the place where the Cobb's car had got stuck on the common in front of the Brown's house. She says, 'Look at that! Our nice common that we always take such good care of! Wouldn't you think that people would have more consideration and decency than to drive their cars on the grass when the ground is so soft!'

"I didn't tell her, as I suppose I might have, that the next time we have a storm like that one we're a-going to pass a law that parents sha'n't try to get home to their kids to try to keep them from being scared to death if it means mussing up anybody's lawn.

" 'Nother woman, too, Miss Dale, she's the old chick that lives alone out School Street. A tree fell down in front of her house and the 8 only way around it was across her lawn. She came out and gave everybody hell that did it, including the ambulance and the hearse, so I hear. Wonder what she expected them to do. Stay there 'till out street department got around to cut up the tree? They couldn't turn around even without going on her lawn.

"Never see such a bawl baby as that Doctor Brown is. He came over in the morning with tears streaming down his face and asked me if I could cash a fifteen dollar check. I told

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him I could, and asked him what the matter was, if someone was dead. 'No', he said, 'but my trees are down, the roof is broken and I'm going to need all this for repairs. I was keeping it for another purpose, but it will have to go'.

"Shucks, I says, 'Your trees are down? Your trees, hey? Take a look up the street. Now look down the street. Look at my yard. See I've got the oil truck in here behind this — d— d forest, I says. I can't even start repairs to my roof. I got to get that truck out some way, for if it turns cold, or even a little cool, Doctor Brown will begin hollering for kerosene. He'll holler anyway, for he must have kerosene in order to cook. He don't know enough to cook on a camp fire with all the wood he could burn right in his yard all piled 'round for him — handy.'

"I said, 'You ain't hurt be yer? Nor Mrs. Brown, she ain't hurt, is she? Remember when you fell down the attic stairs and smashed yourself all up?'

9

'Yes', says he, 'And it cost me a hundred and ninety-six dollars, too.'

"What are you going to do with a man like that? And him a doctor of divinity. You know I went down to his church once. I kinda thought I would like to hear him preach. He's a darned good preacher. He preached from the text, 'Fear Not, The Lord Will Provide'. I just happened to think about it when I was a-talkin to him.

" 'doctor Brown', I says, 'What are you belly-aching about? Doesn't it say somewhere, 'Fear not. The Lord will provide?'"

'Yes, it does, Dunnell. Yes it does. I forgot. I'm sorry. Yes, I should have more faith.'

"That's him. Keeps his religion in one compartment and his business sense in another. Well, guess we got a customer here. Have to excuse me awhile. Don't hurry. I'll be right

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back. Damned if my mouth don't feel better since I got to talkin. Guess you're good for the toothache."